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Curating in the Postdigital Age

Anna Edmundson

It seems nowadays that any aspect of collecting and displaying tangible or intangible material culture is labeled as curating: shopkeepers curate their wares; DJs curate their musical selections; magazine editors curate media stories; and hipsters curate their coffee tables.

Given the increasing ubiquity and complexity of 21st-century notions of curatorship, the current issue of *MC Journal*, 'curate', provides an excellent opportunity to consider some of the changes that have occurred in professional practice since the emergence of the 'digital turn'. There is no doubt that the internet and interactive media have transformed the way we live our daily lives—and for many cultural commentators it only makes sense that they should also transform our cultural experiences.

In this paper, I want to examine the issue of curatorial practice in the postdigital age, looking some of the ways that curating has changed over the last twenty years—and some of the ways it has not. The term postdigital comes from the work of Ross Parry, and is used to 'reference the 'tipping point' where the use of digital technologies became normative practice in museums (24). Overall, I contend that although new technologies have substantially facilitated the way that curators do their jobs, core business and values have not changed as the result of the digital turn. While, major paradigm shifts have occurred in the field of professional curatorship over the last twenty years, these shifts have been issue-driven rather than a result of new technologies.

Everyone's a Curator

In a 2009 article in the New York Times, journalist Alex Williams commented on the growing trend in American consumer culture of labeling oneself a curator. "The word 'curate,'" he observed, "has become a fashionable code word among the aesthetically minded, who seem to paste it onto any activity that involves culling and selecting" (1). Williams dated the origins of the popular adoption of the term 'curating' to a decade earlier, noting the strong association between the uptake and the rise of the internet (2).

This association is not surprising. The development of increasingly interactive software such as Web 2.0 has led to a rapid rise in new technologies aimed at connecting people and information in ways that were previously unimaginable. In particular the internet has become a space in which people can collect, store and most importantly share vast quantities of information.

This information is often about objects. According to sociologist Jyri Engeström, the most successful social network sites on the internet (such as Pinterest, Flickr, Houzz etc), use discrete objects, rather than educational content or interpersonal relationships, as the basis for social interaction. So objects become the node for inter-personal communication. In these and other sites, internet users can find, collate and display multiple images of objects on the same page, which can in turn be connected at the press of a button to other related sources of information in the form of text, commentary or more images.

These sites are often seen as the opportunity to virtually curate mini-exhibitions, as well as to create mood boards or sites of virtual consumption. The idea of curating as selective aesthetic editing is also popular in online markets places such as Etsy where numerous sellers offer 'curated' selections from home wares, to prints, to (my personal favorite) a curated selection of cat toys. In all of these exercises there is an emphasis on the idea of connoisseurship.

As part of his article on the new breed of 'curators', for example, Alex Williams interviewed Tom Kalendrain, the Fashion Director of a leading American department store, which had engaged in a collaboration with Scott Schuman of the fashion blog, the Sartorialist.

According to Kalendrain the store had asked Schuman to 'curate' a collection of clothes for them to sell. He justified calling Schuman a curator by explaining: "It was precisely his eye that made the store want to work with him; it was about the right shade of blue, about the cut, about the width of a lapel" (cited in Williams 2).

The interview reveals much about current popular notions of what it means to be a curator. The central emphasis of Kalendrain's distinction was on connoisseurship: exerting a privileged

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Dr Anna Edmundson is a Research Fellow in the Centre for Heritage and Museums at the Australian National University. She has worked as a curator and academic for over fifteen years. During this time she has curated thirty exhibitions on Aboriginal and Pacific Islander art and history, her current work focuses on developing a universal theory of museum-making that includes Indigenous as well as Western models of museum practice.